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from the June 16, 2003 edition

(Photograph)



LAPTOP LEARNING:
 Students in Alex Briasco-Brin's seventh grade math class all have their own laptops.
 MELANIE STETSON FREEMAN - STAFF



Maine ushers in a laptop revolution in the schools
 By [Abraham McLaughlin](#) | Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor
 FREEPORT, MAINE – Until this year, Emily Foster - a red-haired, freckle-faced, seventh grader - "despised" math.

"I never used to be that good at math," she says, flashing a bright, toothy smile. "But now, I've gotten a lot more confident."

A big reason for Emily's improvement is the small white computer she totes around Freeport Middle School. The laptop is part of Maine's first-in-the-nation program, which gave the state's 17,000 seventh-graders their own new Apple computers last fall.

Now, at the end of the experiment's first year, the consensus seems to be that it's a hit. Emily says she especially loves "Speedmath," a quiz game she has spent many hours outside class playing.

And teachers say laptops enable them to automate parts of the learning process - including quizzes and tests - thus leaving more time for them to focus on each child's needs. One report says it's even cutting down on absenteeism and misbehavior.

There are downsides, including a greater risk of plagiarizing information from websites. But many folks in this largely rural, lower-tech state, relish the laptops' arrival - and Maine's pioneering role in America's march toward higher-tech learning. In fact, the \$37.2 million program is so popular that Maine plans to expand it to eighth-graders next year - despite a \$1.2 billion state budget gap.

Since the computers are all linked to a wireless network, "a student can be walking down the hall and logging onto the web," says Kevin Perkins, assistant principal at Memorial Middle School in South Portland.

"The laptops give them access to many more resources," than



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the school library, he adds. The computers let them "go much more in-depth than they ever did before." They can create PowerPoint presentations, make movies, and design brochures.

Of course, many people here agree that the laptops aren't substitutes for good teaching. After all, it was Alex Briasco-Brin - Emily's long-haired, high-energy, math teacher - who wrote the computer game that sparked her love of math.

An unusual math class

Mr. Briasco-Brin is no ordinary math teacher. This year, his students launched model rockets, dabbled in aerodynamics and aspect-loading ratios, and learned to calculate baseball statistics. They've even done fractals.

"Mr. Brin," as the students call him, is often more hyper than his charges. Each time the school's office manager calls the classroom, for instance, he instructs the kids to mimic an animal. "Cows," he yells one afternoon as he picks up the phone. His students moo like professionals.

But Briasco-Brin insists that the laptops have transformed his teaching. He says one of the best things he's done is develop the Speedmath program. Similar to a video game, the program gives the children progressively more difficult math problems, until they answer one incorrectly. Students compete to see who can get the most correct answers in a row.

"They've gotten hours and hours more practice than they did without the computers," Briasco-Brin says. Freeport students can even take their laptops home for extra practice. (Only about one-third of the state's schools let students take laptops home.)

The laptops have also made it easier for teachers to design and grade tests. Now that the computers do more of the work, Briasco-Brin can spend time giving students one-on-one instruction. "That's the best teaching situation - to get to know kids individually," he says.

Briasco-Brin has embraced the new technology from the start, but others were more dubious. Elizabeth Miller is a seventh-grade social-studies teacher at Memorial Middle School. She describes herself as a techno-skeptic, who still uses a rotary phone.

When the laptops arrived at Memorial, Ms. Miller had two worries: that she wouldn't be able to learn the technology and that the kids couldn't be trusted to safely and responsibly handle the \$1,700 machines. "I have kids who can't even remember to bring pencils to class," she says, laughing. But now she's a believer, even if a slightly cautious one.

Studying Silk Road by silicon

In a recent world-geography unit on the Silk Road, Miller's students scoured the web for details about cities along the ancient trade route. She found that the lower-level readers were dramatically more engaged. "There's something about having it on the screen that means they're more willing to stick with it," she says.

After researching the topic, the students wrote and edited their papers during class - instead of in the computer lab - as Ms. Miller glanced over their shoulders. "I got a far better quality of writing than I've seen in my seven years of teaching," she says.

One danger of using the laptops, though, was plagiarism - which is made much easier by the copy-and-paste feature of many programs. "If a sentence has a dependent clause smack in the middle, and if there are too many three-syllable words,



you start to wonder," Miller says.

But there has been relatively little dishonesty or abuse, school officials say. Briasco-Brin's students profess little desire to play illicit games or instant-message their friends during class. They know their computer will be taken away quickly if they do. And they know that John Lunt, the school's computer guru, can see everything happening on their computer from his office.

What research shows

Overall, a mid-year evaluation, conducted by researchers from the University of Southern Maine, found that students using the laptops were more engaged in school, doing more homework, and misbehaving less than in previous years.

Other studies have come to conflicting conclusions about laptop use. But regardless, the trend is spreading. Districts from Florida to Virginia to California have launched similar projects.

Yet, for Ryan Petersen, one of Briasco-Brin's students, the computer has been nothing but great. He was earning C-minuses in math last year. Now he's getting B-pluses. The computer has also become an extension of his personality. He has pictures of fast-and-furious cars on his screensaver, for instance. The biggest bummer about the laptops, he says, is that he and his classmates must turn them in before the end of the school year. "I was really hoping that I could take it home over the summer."

(Map)



TOM BROWN - STAFF
BASE MAP: MAGELLAN
GEOGRAPHIX




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